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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a study to identify the specific needs graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in speech communication have while teaching. Six GTAs completed a description of their experience as GTAs, maintained a day-by-day teaching log and participated in a group discussion. The paper uses a qualitative-phenomenological approach to reduce and interpret the data. The results presented in the paper give a definition of the GTA experience. The paper identifies specific needs that can be implemented in a GTA training program. One table of data and three tables listing GTA needs are included. (Contains 20 references.) (Author/RS)

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The Frustrated GTA: A Qualitative Investigation  
Identifying the Needs within the  
Graduate Teaching Assistant Experience

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Running head: THE FRUSTRATED GTA: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION

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# ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a study to identify the specific needs GTAs have while teaching. Six GTAs completed a description of their experience as GTAs, a day-by-day teaching log and participated in a group discussion. The study uses a qualitative-phenomenological approach to reduce and interpret the data. The results give a definition of the GTA experience. This paper identifies specific needs that can be implemented in a GTA training program.

TITLE: The Frustrated GTA: A Qualitative Investigation Identifying the Needs Within the Graduate Teaching Assistant Experience.

The field of speech communication in higher education has enjoyed great popularity in recent years. This popularity has not only brought enrollment increases but the demand for instructors has increased as well. In one survey, Gibson, Hanna, and Huddleston (1985) found that the responding schools noted one of the biggest problems with the basic course is "acquiring qualified staff." The survey also found that 71% of the basic courses are taught by graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) and junior faculty members. In a survey of 69 speech communication departments, Buerkel-Rothfuss and Gray (1990) found that many courses in speech communication are taught by GTAs who lack teaching experience and are given autonomous sections. Whereas, many GTA's are not prepared to teach and most basic courses are taught by GTAs, it is not a surprise that finding "qualified staff" is a major problem.

Most of the published articles concerning GTA training programs are a description of program content (Allen, 1976; Carroll, 1980; Dalgaard & Dalgaard, 1977; DeBoer, 1979; Friedrich & Powell, 1979a; Grasha, 1978; Phelps, 1969). The studies concerned specifically with GTA teaching effectiveness are mainly inconclusive (Cheatham & Jordan, 1972; Nyquist & Staton-Spicer, 1979). Other programs are created from an attempt to identify graduate student needs (Andrews, 1983; Monson, 1970). Monson and Andrews use faculty and GTA input in developing a training program. However, Monson's needs are not concentrated on teaching and Andrews uses post seminar evaluations that contextualize the responses.

At the Eastern Conference for Basic Speech Directors in 1978 there was: consensus among the directors that effective orientation programs were essential from the standpoints of both the undergraduate student and teaching assistant, it was also recognized that such programs require a systematic analysis of the needs, criteria, and other variables unique to the university or college at hand. This did not

preclude the possibility that established training programs might be modified and adapted to the needs of other institutions (DeBoer, 1979, p. 328).

A problem with much of the research in education is that it moves past the needs of teaching and tries to understand teaching's relationship to a number of variables. Gaff (1982) believes that a serious limitation within educational research is that "the research seldom deals with the basic ideas or concepts" (p. 89). By starting with assumed needs or a model of effective teaching, these researchers have distorted what is actually lived, by predetermining the needs that exist.

It is the researcher's contention that previous studies conducted on GTAs and GTA training programs did not go far enough. The creation and evaluation of GTA training programs based on a teaching effectiveness model or a program coordinator's assumptions may have proven to be reliable. However, were these studies valid? Did they assess the needs of the individuals involved? A more holistic setting is necessary for gaining insight into the situation. This holistic approach stresses relevance with the resulting conclusions being based on the perceived needs of those involved. Due to the limitations of previous studies, this holistic approach justifies the necessity for a naturalistic inquiry into the needs of graduate teaching assistants who teach the basic speech course. This study is the first attempt using this paradigm.

Since there is much disparity in the content of GTA training programs, the identification of needs from a holistic perspective could help the creation and relevance of GTA training programs. Graduate teaching assistants teach for a relatively short time. However, due to their effect upon the students they teach, plus the limited resources in money and time of departments, it is beneficial to find what needs exist in order to facilitate need fulfillment.

The purpose of this study is to identify the needs GTAs have when teaching the basic public speaking course. The primary research question is: What are the perceived needs of graduate teaching assistants in teaching the basic public speaking course?

## METHOD

The understanding of narrative approaches research from the perspective of a text to be interpreted. This involves written texts, spoken texts, conversations, speeches, or interview responses (Polkinghorne, 1983). Within this study GTAs completed a description of their teaching experience, a day-by-day teaching log and participated in a group discussion.

### Description of the Teaching Experience

Each GTA reflected back upon his or her experience of being a graduate teaching assistant the previous semester. This is a general description of the experience both in the classroom and other relevant factors of being a GTA. This reflection process gives a historical-holistic perspective of the GTA experience.

### Teaching Log

Participating GTAs were required to keep a day-by-day teaching log for one month. The purpose of the log is to provide text that discovers the most salient issues that emerge throughout the semester. Because of the timeliness of the issues, the teaching log provides unique and spontaneous text. The logs were given to the GTAs one month before midterm. The logs were later used as a stimulus for a group discussion.

### Group Discussion of Graduate Teaching Assistants

The themes from the teaching logs and the reflection of the GTA experience were used as an agenda for an informal group discussion. The openness of the group discussion was chosen to allow the ideas, thoughts and experiences of each person to emerge without being "categorized." This unstructuredness allowed the discussion to evolve. This experience was taped, transcribed and reduced and interpreted to discover meaning. The philosophical base for this method is that inherent within every problem exists a need. It is the researcher's objective to make explicit what is given implicitly from the experience.

### Subjects

All subjects are working on a master's degree in speech communication. One subject has secondary education teaching experience. All others have no prior teaching experience. All GTAs completed their undergraduate degree in Speech Communication.

### Graduate Program Background Information

The graduate program in speech communication used in this study consists solely of master's students. There are a total of seven graduate teaching assistantships awarded with the responsibility to teach two sections of the basic public speaking class each semester. A faculty graduate coordinator receives release time to assist in the preparation of these GTAs. The preparation consists of a two day pre-semester orientation that introduces the textbook, the grade book, the syllabus and explains how to critique using the department's rating scale. The department also requires a one hour credit/no credit course, "Techniques for Teaching Assistants in Speech Communication".

### Qualitative Analysis and Interpretation

Phenomenology, as a methodology within the human sciences, provides a method that allows for meaning and an understanding of the diverse types of human experience. Lanigan (1979) identifies three steps in the phenomenological method: description, definition, and interpretation. This method is applied to the texts from the GTAs' description of the teaching experience, the teaching log and the group discussion.

Description. Description involves introspection and reflection and thus does more than simply explain or report, it reconstructs through a "language of reality" (Natanson, 1974).

Definition. This step generates definitions of the experience by isolating the structure of the essences contained in the description.

Interpretation. Interpretation is coming to the essence of the essential parts from the reduction and description of the experience in an attempt to specify meaning. The description and reduction comes through language and conscious experience, but

interpretation attempts to move beyond this conscious level and discover the pre-conscious or pre-reflective level of the experience.

Using verbatim texts, the researcher and a judge who is trained in qualitative analysis extracted themes from the description of the teaching experience, the teaching logs and the transcription of the group discussion. The themes were then put into two initial clusters of common meaning and integrated into a set of theme clusters for each set of texts. From these theme clusters, a complete set of themes clustered around common meaning were created for the entire study. Giorgi (1975) states that the key criterion of qualitative research is "whether a reader, adopting the same viewpoint as articulated by the researcher, can also see what the researcher saw, whether or not he agrees with it" (p. 96). Thus, the final reduction to explicate the fundamental essence and structure should be understood by others who study the transcripts.

## RESULTS

### Defining and Interpreting the Graduate Teaching Assistant

#### Experience: Identifying Graduate Teaching Assistant Needs

From the descriptions of the teaching log, the teaching experience and the group discussion each statement is categorized into themes (see Table I). Each description provides an unique and individual insight to the graduate teaching assistant experience. The description of the teaching experience is an individual's reflective description of the previous semester's teaching experience. The individual teaching log records the immediate teaching experience. The group discussion enables the GTAs to use one another as a stimulus to reflect upon the entire experience as graduate teaching assistants.

In comparing these three descriptions we find that the predominant theme is the need for preparation for the duties of teaching (See Table I). This lack of preparation is the main source of the frustration that the GTAs feel. In the reflective description of the teaching experience and the group discussion the main source of frustration is the

TABLE I  
COMPARISON OF GTA DESCRIPTIONS ACCORDING  
TO DEFINITION CATEGORIES

| CATEGORY                 | NO. OF INDIVIDUAL THEME STATEMENTS |     |     |       |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|-----|-----|-------|
|                          | TE                                 | TL  | GD  | Total |
| NEED TEACHER PREPARATION | 24                                 | 109 | 100 | 233   |
| FRUSTRATING EXPERIENCE   | 14                                 | 37  | 46  | 97    |
| BENEFICIAL AND REWARDING | 11                                 | 21  | 21  | 53    |
| ROLE CONFLICT            | 8                                  | 19  | 6   | 33    |
| CARE ABOUT STUDENTS      | 0                                  | 15  | 11  | 26    |
| MISCELLANEOUS            | 0                                  | 9   | 10  | 19    |

Note. TE = The description of the teaching experience.  
TL = The description of the teaching log.  
GD = The description of group discussion.

The definition categories are those that emerged from the theme descriptions.

uncertainty and lack of preparation for teaching. In the teaching log the frustration stems from unmotivated students. In either case, frustration is a relevant theme.

The themes stating that the experience is beneficial and rewarding in the teaching log are mostly examples of the sense of accomplishment the GTA feels in the classroom. In the reflective nature of the teaching experience and the group discussion, the benefits of the experience are holistic in nature and not individual specific instances. On a day-by-day log it may be difficult to see past the frustration of each specific day.

Whereas role conflict did not have many theme statements, the qualitative strength of the statements makes this an important category. The GTAs feel very strongly about the priority of the graduate degree and the conflict this creates with their role as teachers.

Only in the teaching experience does an area (caring about the students) not have any themes. The most themes that showed a concern for the students came from the teaching log. In recording the immediate experience of the teaching log, examples clearly show that the GTAs go out of their way to help their students.

Through the phenomenological process these descriptions are reduced to a concise definition. This is followed by an interpretation of the survey results through the researcher's reflection upon the data. Through the process of interpretation, the needs that exist within the graduate teaching assistant experience are made explicit.

#### Definition of the Experience of Being a

#### Graduate Teaching Assistant

The experience of being a graduate teaching assistant is one of frustration and uncertainty. These emotions are initially due to a lack of information and preparation for the duties and responsibilities of being a graduate teaching assistant. Later frustration is from a lack of direction and feedback from a graduate coordinator and from working with apathetic students. GTAs need to receive faculty support and be prepared in a variety of techniques to motivate and involve students and to make classroom material interesting and clear. The preparation

needs to create minimal conflict with the role of student. Being a teacher and a student at the same time creates a conflict of roles. This conflict results in GTAs who often feel overloaded and tired of teaching. GTAs feel that the undergraduate suffers in this conflict. Still, GTAs care about their students and express their concern. In retrospect, the overall graduate teaching assistant experience is viewed as beneficial and rewarding.

### Interpretation of Themes

From an overall perspective each component of the definition of the graduate teaching assistant experience is interpreted. Following the interpretation, the needs that exist within that part of the definition are made explicit.

#### Being a GTA is a Frustrating Experience

The experience of being a graduate teaching assistant is one of frustration and uncertainty. These emotions are initially due to a lack of information and preparation for the duties and responsibilities of being a graduate teaching assistant. Later frustration is from a lack of direction and feedback from a graduate coordinator and from working with apathetic students.

The start of the assistantship is a "big unknown" to the graduate student. One GTA said, "I was really scared. I was kinda scared at the beginning cause I had never--I don't know, done any teaching or anything either. I didn't know what to expect..." They didn't know what to expect as a teacher or as a student. A GTA commented, "I had a lot of anxiety the first semester about teaching and graduate school in general." Much of this anxiety stems from a lack of teaching experience.

Having graduated with a bachelor's degree and having had experience as a student doesn't make GTAs feel qualified to teach. The effect of this lack of preparation is shown in the adjectives given in the responses: "scary"; "nervous wreck"; "bewildered"; "frustrating"; "a lot of anxiety"; and, "apprehensive".

There are many reasons for these responses. One GTA was unsure of the ability to use class time.

To begin with I never felt I could keep em in the room for 50 minutes. What am I going to do bring in some baseballs and make em play softball? I don't know if I could lecture a half hour on a sheet of paper.

Lack of support from family and friends affects their confidence.

Then all my friends and everyone back at home are like "Yea right. You're gonna be able to do that" and then they just started reducing my--they were basically just teasing me but I was like "Gosh. Can I really do this?".

However, GTAs also feel some confidence in their teaching knowing that the graduate coordinator or department chairperson will give them support. One GTA said, "Some of the faculty assured us that they would stand behind us all the way, no matter what; that was nice to know". This support was not only stated but also was given as GTAs sought advice on several occasions.

GTA preparation is "too much, too soon." One GTA observed, "...it's so overwhelming when you look at all this and the coordinator is flying through chapters in five minutes".

Another concern is the GTAs' insecurity about their ability to teach. One GTA said, "I felt they would be intimidated by a young teacher...I also wonder if they are receiving the instruction and proper class material that they would receive from an experienced teacher".

To help prepare the GTAs for the semester and possibly alleviate some of their anxiety, a two day orientation is held before the semester starts. However, only a few of the basics of teaching are discussed. One GTA observed, "They gave us a book, grade book, and a red pen and taught us how to critique speeches. They gave an example of the first few days of class and cut us loose". The result of the orientation is, as one GTA commented, the GTAs "felt thrown into the program with inadequate information". This

feeling was felt by several GTAs. "It was a kind of baptism by fire in the beginning". "I felt unprepared". "An eight hour orientation left an awful lot to learn on our own".

The GTAs state several things that would help prepare them for the semester: "a core of lecture notes"; "A workshop"; "to read the book before"; "an organized activity file"; and, "hear from the department earlier in the summer". After having gone through the experience of being a GTA, several GTAs gave advice to help future graduate assistants. They stated, "Relax. Everything will take care of itself" and "Just have fun with it". Three other GTAs advocated to, "Know your resources", "Do more activities" and "Go to your teachers...Get something different". These suggestions and advice would alleviate some frustration of the teaching experience. It seems that if the GTAs had had this knowledge when they started, the experience would have been more positive.

After teaching by trial and error for a semester, the GTAs build up some confidence and things go smoother. One GTA observed, "After planning lectures and activities on a regular basis, I started to get the hang of things...Once I built up some confidence everything went smooth". Still another GTA said, "We're old pros now". From these and other statements it is found that teaching goes better the second semester. Thus, once GTAs have hands on experience they perceive themselves as better prepared to teach. Yet, one GTA had increased anxiety concerning teaching the second semester, "I didn't know if I expected more of myself this semester, I just don't feel like I was doing as good a job".

GTAs are also frustrated and upset by students who are unmotivated, don't listen in class, miss speech days or do assignments incorrectly. When students act like they "just don't care" GTAs feel: "pissed off"; "disappointed"; "furious"; "mad"; "angry"; "frustrated"; and, "ticked off". These reactions from the GTAs are due to several reasons. They feel it is a waste of time when the students just don't care. One GTA commented, "Why the hell am I even here? You just want to leave. I'm wasting my time". They want their students to succeed, but their students often don't care.

One kid last week--he had a great speech....But I had to take 30 points off and he just didn't care. I mean that kind of bums me out when they just don't give a shit at all, not at all.

When students are unprepared a class day is wasted. One GTA said, "Six students came unprepared. I had nothing else planned for the day and I was furious". Another GTA is upset when student's don't listen in class, "There was one point however, that aggravated me. I asked a question and if they had been paying attention they would have known the answer".

GTAs want to motivate their students, but find it difficult. A GTA said, "I wish that I could motivate the class a little more and spark their interest". Some techniques that GTAs use to motivate students are penalties on late speeches, pop quizzes, using visual aids, and group assignments. However, the students are still difficult to "open up" in class and are not very enthusiastic. The inability to make class interesting and to motivate the students creates additional frustration for the GTAs.

It is the students' attitude that dictates the "climate" of the class. When students are apathetic and uninvolved in class the GTAs just want to end class. They often did let class out early due to negative student attitudes. As stated by one GTA, "They all seemed to be unconcerned with the material, so I covered it quickly and dismissed them at 8:35". In addition, when students get involved in the class the GTAs' attitude changes. One GTA observed, "Overall, the beginning of the class was boring. However, after the students started participating it went much better". After a bad round of speeches GTAs often feel as if they have failed as teachers.

The GTAs are given the label teaching assistant but they have the responsibilities of a teacher. Being a student and a teacher creates frustration from their perspective and lack of credibility from their students' perspective. The GTAs are teachers without the initial respect of full time teachers. Establishing credibility in the classroom is a concern for the GTAs. Much of this is because the GTAs are only a few years older than their students and

they have a lack of confidence as teachers. One GTA stated, "Besides looking like I'm 18,<sup>14</sup> I felt like when I walked in everyone was gonna think 'Oh, here's another student'". Another one said, "I don't consider us teachers. You know we blend in". The female graduate students have additional problems earning the respect of students. One GTA observed, "I think they try and take advantage of girl--graduate assistant teaching assistants".

Several things help the GTAs to deal with this lack of credibility and confidence. One GTA gained confidence from an experience with an older student who stated, "Oh, I never would have known this was the first time you ever taught". Another GTA uses rationalization, "I would look at these guys and say you know they don't have any experience either". One GTA uses a positive attitude "I thought to myself, I'm going to have as much credibility as I give myself". To stop from "blending in", one GTA stated "I always use for credibility carrying around the grade book and a red pen".

GTA Needs Identified. See Table II.

#### GTAs Need to be Prepared to Teach

GTAs need to receive faculty support and be prepared in a variety of techniques to motivate and involve students and to make classroom material interesting and clear.

GTAs want to do well as teachers, yet they feel they lack the knowledge and the experience to succeed. They need to be prepared as teachers for their sake and for their students.

This preparation consists of many factors. GTAs need to be able to make class interesting, discipline their classes, prepare interesting lectures, motivate their students, utilize resources in teaching, have faculty feedback and direction, establish credibility, manage class time, help students with communication apprehension, have an understanding of course material, and use a variety of teaching techniques.

TABLE II

## GTA NEEDS IDENTIFIED - FRUSTRATING EXPERIENCE THEMES

- 
- 
1. GTAs need direction and support from a graduate coordinator who genuinely cares about helping the GTAs.
  2. GTAs need to be provided with information concerning their duties and responsibilities as a teacher and a graduate student prior to their arrival at the university.
  3. GTAs need to have confidence that they are qualified to teach.
  4. GTAs need to have preparation that progresses as the semester progresses. So that preparation is not "too much, too soon."
  5. Upon completing the pre-semester orientation seminar the GTAs need to feel that they are prepared to teach.
  6. GTAs need to be in control of the "climate" of the class.

After the pre-semester orientation, a weekly meeting is established to help the GTAs with any problems that they might have. These meetings are beneficial at first, but lack of planning make these a waste of time. One GTA advocated, "...by mid-semester, this weekly meeting seemed to become useless and chore like...For the most part, we were in there ten minutes or so and then we were gone". The GTAs want assistance. Overall, the attitude is that they "felt something was missing in these meetings". When information is given the meetings are beneficial. However, only when individual questions are asked is any information given.

The main source of assistance in the classroom comes from fellow GTAs. With offices that are in close proximity to one another and class schedules that are similar the GTAs have daily contact. This interaction is a great help in their teaching.

The one thing that I think really helped a lot was when we were in the office and I'd be like "What are you going to do today?" and we'd sort of throw ideas at each other as far as lecturing the classes.

Another GTA stated, "I knew I could rely on you guys. That somebody would have something I could run in and Xerox real quick before class". Informal discussions and the comradery that they feel gives GTAs the confidence that if they aren't prepared to teach, they can always rely on their fellow GTAs. The reliance on fellow GTAs may be due to a lack of teaching support from other sources.

Occasionally the GTAs seek out other faculty for advice or activities to use in their classes. The faculty sought are usually the younger teachers in the department. One GTA observed, "They're more willing to give us things...maybe they've just been out of it too and they know what it's like".

After teaching for a semester the GTAs learn from experience how to discipline their classes. One GTA stated, "One thing I learned right away was that if you give an inch they take a mile. I realize now that it's easier to come across tough and get easier than vice versa". Another one observed, "I think I came across as a bitch today, but I don't want

them stepping all over me like last semester". Some techniques used to discipline the class are: "I make them leave class"; "I talk to them after class"; "I laid down the law"; "I raise my voice"; "I would embarrass the hell out of the person" and, "I just turn around and I'm just starin' at them".

Use of discipline and authority are also techniques to help the GTAs establish credibility in the classroom. One GTA tells students, "Hey, listen. I'm going to be the one that's going to be putting down your grade at the end of the semester. You better respect me and treat me as a teacher".

Several GTAs feel a sense of power and control in the classroom. "I gave an exam today. This always gives me a feeling of control". "I could flunk these people if I wished. It is strange knowing you control the lives of 50 other people."

The teaching strategy used most often is the lecture because they feel that "lecturing is necessary" or "I found that lecturing can get real boring but I felt that the students deserve a little teaching (although they hate it)". Yet, both GTAs and students find lectures boring. One GTA commented, "My classes don't like lectures.... Since I take my lectures straight from the book, they don't take many notes, they just read along. It's very discouraging".

GTAs also have difficulty involving the students in class discussion. One GTA commented, "I had them discuss the questions in class and as usual, it was like pulling teeth".

Part of this boring format is due to the GTAs trying to prepare for class immediately before they teach. This not only results in their classes being boring and unorganized but also the GTAs don't know the course content. Problems occur when the GTAs read the book the same time as the students. One GTA said, "A lot of the times you weren't looking ahead and I'd emphasize one thing out of this chapter and the next chapter was all that one topic". Another GTA stated that often the students "would have in depth questions about the chapter. Here you are...you're not--you know--really sure". Another GTA

echoes this comment, "They had a lot of questions about the test and they'd catch me off guard".

Often the GTAs fail to have anything prepared when they went in to teach. When this occurs they would rely on discussion questions. A GTA said, "If I didn't have a lesson planned or chapter read I'd give discussion questions out".

The GTAs know that their classes aren't interesting. One GTA commented, "The only thing I was not evaluated well on was 'presents material in an interesting manner.' That doesn't bother me though because I already knew that". Another GTA reiterated, "It is hard not to notice that the students are not interested. This is in part my fault, because I should be more creative in my approach".

GTAs want to make class interesting and during the semester, they experiment with various teaching styles and techniques. One GTA said, "I've been experimenting with different ways of getting them the information without a dry, boring lecture". Some of these techniques are: "Working in groups on chapter questions or quizzes"; "I had the kids outline and present the chapter"; "I reserve the last 5 to 10 minutes of class at various times in the semester for impromptu speeches"; "I broke them into groups and broke up the chapter and had my class lecture on the chapter"; and, "I'd plan an activity". Of the techniques used, the GTAs and students enjoy activities the most. GTAs also have problems with managing classroom time. Classes are often let out early due to poor planning.

I ran out of material today though! I covered up by passing out their speech grades!

In the second class I had two make- up speeches--Then I didn't have enough time!!.

Once the semester starts, the GTAs are on their own in the classroom. GTAs want to be good teachers. They want and need faculty feedback to improve their teaching. The only feedback received is from their students. A graduate coordinator is given release time from classroom duties to help the GTAs. Yet, he gives no assistance unless the GTAs go

to him with an individual problem. One area that the GTAs want improvement on is their teaching.

I was not, and to my knowledge, no one has ever been evaluated while teaching. This would be helpful, because everyone needs to be evaluated once in awhile to get better and to be a more effective teacher. Also none of my activities or lesson plans have ever been checked out...they said they would do this but it never happened.

Several GTAs felt that because no one evaluated them they didn't do anything "drastically wrong". "No news is good news." Though evaluations would have made them nervous, the general feeling is that evaluations would make teaching a more positive experience.

The GTAs also identify several unique needs of public speaking. The GTAs need to know and have experience on how to deal with students with high communication apprehension. One GTA noted, "I had a young man in my 8:00 who was high anxiety. This was also something I had no experience in dealing with". This topic is addressed in the pre-semester orientation seminar. But another GTA suggested, "it's totally different when you talk about it for a couple of minutes in an orientation then you get thrown in on it". Several GTAs state that they fail to assign specific days for specific students to speak. Whomever is ready on a speaking day is who speaks. If no one is ready, then no one speaks. Thus, some problems with scheduling may be created by the GTAs. One problem identified that is somewhat unique to public speaking and is connected to motivating the students is that the class is a general university requirement.

GTA Needs Identified. See Table III.

#### GTAs Experience Role Conflict

The preparation needs to create minimal conflict with the role of student. Being a teacher and a student at the same time creates a conflict of roles. This conflict results in GTAs who often feel overloaded and tired of teaching. GTAs feel that the undergraduate suffers in this conflict.

TABLE III

## GTA NEEDS IDENTIFIED - TEACHER PREPARATION THEME

- =====
1. GTAs need to have a cognitive and experiential knowledge of teaching in general within a pre-semester orientation seminar and in weekly meetings. GTAs need to have a cognitive and experimental knowledge:
    - a. of how to discipline their classes.
    - b. of how to establish credibility in the classroom.
    - c. of how to create and present interesting lectures.
    - d. of methods other than lectures to disseminate information to their classes.
    - e. in classroom planning and organization to better utilize class time.
    - f. of how to involve students in classroom discussions.
  2. GTAs need to have a cognitive and experiential knowledge of the unique problems of teaching public speaking within a pre-semester orientation seminar and in weekly meetings. GTAs need to have a cognitive and experiential knowledge:
    - a. of how to motivate students in a required course.
    - b. of how to handle students with communication apprehension.
  3. GTAs' pre-semester orientation seminar and weekly meetings need to be well planned and address relevant issues.
  4. GTAs need to have the department or graduate coordinator provide access to teaching resources that can be used in the classroom.
  5. GTAs need to interact with fellow GTAs.
  6. GTAs need to be prepared to teach each individual class period.
  7. GTAs need to be exposed to various teaching styles from which to pattern their own individual style.
  8. GTAs need to have a graduate coordinator who has pedagogical knowledge and experience and is willing to provide GTAs with direction and support.

Once the semester starts the GTAs realize that teaching is time consuming and time is a valuable commodity. One GTA commented, "Grading speeches is a time consuming task which I don't enjoy. Recording grades of speeches and outlines plus the test is a real hassle". GTAs start to realize that teaching is hard work. "I never realized how much thought went into teaching--nothing is worse than looking at blank faces, and trying to come up with ideas that are interesting takes time. I really need a vacation. "

The result of teaching taking so much effort is not only GTAs being "burnt out" and not "putting any effort into teaching", but also when there is a shortage of time then the GTAs' priority is their graduate degree. One GTA advocated, "My education comes first to me. My priority is to get my degree, and if that means I can't devote enough time to my teaching that's the way it is". Another GTA stated:

...after all, what was I really here for? Of course to get a master's degree. This I knew would have an effect on my teaching and time to prepare my lessons.

Especially, since I would be both teacher and student in the same semesters.

The undergraduate students pay the price when this conflict in time occurs. A GTA stated, "I've got too much of my own work to waste time doing their grading very carefully".

GTAs want to do a good job teaching and they feel bad when a conflict occurs. Most of the GTAs had similar comments: "I feel bad when my classes get hard or time consuming because my students suffer"; "I don't feel like I'm being fair to the kids. It's like I don't have time to be spending making up exciting things to do"; "I wish I could devote more time to the students because I feel that they are not getting full attention. A lot of my time is focused on my courses and then I transfer back to my teacher role"; and, "Besides having to get our own homework done, we had to read and prepare a lesson and each chapter, I feel like I really cheated my students sometimes".

One specific area that GTAs feel is unfair to the students is that of tests. One GTA said, "I gave a test today. I feel really bad about giving this test because I know it's a bad one...but we really didn't feel like making a new one up this semester".

Yet, though they put their role as graduate student first, they don't want to jeopardize their position as teacher. "Graduate student would come first...I always made that a priority even though I don't want to compromise my position since we are getting paid and since we're responsible as teachers."

One GTA who put the graduate degree first lacks interest in teaching, "Maybe I wasn't the greatest teacher, but I tried. I'm not intending to continue on teaching so I'm not too concerned about my expertise".

Switching from the role of student to that of teacher also has an effect. One GTA said, "It's hard being a teacher and a student. The transition is hard to make sometimes". The role of student sometimes follows the GTA into the classroom. Another GTA noted, "I almost used it [snow] as an excuse to stay home and work on my thesis. Time is getting short and I find myself thinking about it while teaching".

When there is a shortage of time it is the teacher role that allows the flexibility. This becomes especially true when there is no accountability as a graduate coordinator never sees the GTAs' classes. Classes can be released early or cancelled. Discussion questions can be used every day. Thus, public speaking students do suffer due to the conflict of roles and the shortage of time.

GTA Needs Identified. See Table IV.

#### GTAs Care About Their Students

GTAs care about their students and express their concern.

GTAs sincerely want to help their students. One GTA said, "I'm giving a test...I always want them to achieve high scores". GTAs want to make the class relevant. Another GTA stated, "I try to put it into some kind of practical sense for em". This GTA went on further to say, "I want to make sure I'm as clear as possible". When the GTAs perceive a

TABLE IV

## GTA NEEDS IDENTIFIED - ROLE CONFLICT THEMES

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1. GTAs need to understand that the ideal graduate teaching assistant (perfect teacher and perfect student) is unattainable.
  2. GTAs need to have a minimum level of competency established for their role as teacher.
  3. GTAs need to have knowledge and experience in time management to arrive at a balance in their roles as teacher and student.

need they go out of their way to help the students. One GTA had a student who was failing and "called her the last day you could drop".

In expressing this concern the GTAs make themselves very accessible: "I gave em my home phone number"; "I try to work with them as much as I can"; and, "My phone rang off the hook with questions...All part of the job I guess".

They want their students to succeed and do well in the class. One GTA commented, "I try and write down comments in a positive way in hopes of seeing improvements next time". Another one said, "I wanted them to learn something from me and demonstrate that in their speaking skills". They want their students to learn. Another GTA noted, "Things have really started moving in class and I don't think that's fair--I don't think they get anything out of it at this pace".

One reason for this concern is the sense of accomplishment that GTAs feel when their students excel. This is felt by one GTA who said, "We worked together all semester and he really improved. That made me feel so good. I felt like I'd really helped someone". In addition, being students themselves helps GTAs relate to their classes.

It's just a weird feeling to be teaching kids so close in age. It's good and bad. It's good because I can really relate to what they're going through. Maybe that's why I try to be so flexible and work with them.

GTA Needs Identified. Due to the affective nature of this aspect of the GTA experience, no needs are identified.

#### The GTA Experience is Rewarding

In retrospect, the overall graduate teaching assistant experience is viewed as beneficial and rewarding.

The benefits and rewards are both affective and financial. The affective rewards derive from the GTAs learning a lot from both their students and from the teaching experience. One GTA, who notes these rewards, stated, "As an instructor that's rewarding to me to see students apply what I have taught them". Two GTAs stated other benefits

from the experience as the opportunity of meeting some "neat kids", and gaining "much experience and strength from the GTA position".

When students respond positively or complete assignments correctly GTAs feel successful as teachers: "It's so neat because when they accomplish something I feel so great. I feel like I really accomplished my job!"; "It seemed like they totally grasped the concept, like my teaching has helped!"; "As an instructor that's rewarding to me to see students apply what I taught them"; and, "If they do well, I feel I have succeeded as a teacher". After the semester student evaluations also have an effect. One GTA commented, "We got our teacher evaluations back from last semester. They made me feel real good".

GTAs learn from their student's speeches. One GTA commented "I find myself listening more for enjoyment than from a critical standpoint". They also learn from the content of their students' speeches.

After teaching for a semester the GTAs perceive their teaching skills to have improved. They feel that they have learned organizational skills, speaking skills, and confidence. One GTA observed, "This semester I'm more prepared, I know where I am going, and I feel much more confident!". Another GTA said, "The first week I was nervous, but now 'Ok. No problem.' Just walk in and start talking".

The experience also affects the GTAs in their role as students in several ways: "It's helped a lot with other classes where you have to give presentations"; "I tend to ask questions a lot more"; and, "I can appreciate the teacher's viewpoint more".

GTAs also appreciate the financial rewards. One GTA said, "I got my master's paid for, and it will look good on a resume". In addition the same GTA felt that the skills gained really helped in a recent job interview.

The themes that reflect the overall experience are positive: "Overall it was great!"; "After all it was fun"; "I enjoy teaching the public speaking course to college students immensely"; and, "I feel this was a positive experience". Thus, though the themes that

were supported the most times established the frustration of teaching, when viewed from a holistic perspective the graduate teaching assistantship is a good experience. Still, the experience could be made more positive. "Once again, my experience was good and I feel I have done a good job, but some of the things I mentioned might be looked at by the department to make the GTA program strong and effective."

GTA Needs Identified. Due to the affective nature of this aspect of the GTA experience, no needs are identified.

### Summary

The importance of identifying the needs of graduate teaching assistants can be seen in the degree of frustration that GTAs feel. The needs of the GTA are real. Their frustrations and fears are a dominant fact in their lives.

It appears that the frustration of the experience of being a GTA is created by many different factors: uncertainty about the overall experience, lack of knowledge of their teaching duties, lack of confidence, and lack of ability to motivate their students. The frustration within each of these areas could be reduced and possibly eliminated if GTAs are prepared and supervised in their teaching duties.

Through the application of the needs identified, a holistic-relevant GTA training program can be developed. But, this is not the purpose of the present study. The present study only concerns the identification of these needs.

The needs identified in the present study individually exist in the literature describing GTA training programs (Andrews, 1983; Buerkel-Rothfuss and Gray, 1990; Dalgaard and Dalgaard, 1977; Nyquist and Staton-Spicer, 1979). Yet, only Friedrich and Powell (1979b) have a holistic approach to these needs. Part of this may be because all the programs surveyed are only based on needs that are assumed to exist.

Overall, the goal of the individual GTA training programs and of the educational reform movements are to achieve excellence in education, to facilitate learning and prepare teachers for the classroom. It is through the identification, implementation and evaluation

of needs that relevance and excellence can be achieved. This study is one step toward that  
end.

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